

Education groups list their goals

2 have spun off from Citizens Committee

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Three grass-roots education groups are at work in Owensboro and Daviess County, and in recent weeks their members have approved plans they believe can improve the community's economy and the quality of life.

The plans also point out what makes each group unique and valuable, said Marianne Smith Edge, co-chairwoman of The Citizens Committee on Education, the umbrella group in this threesome.

The Citizens Committee, formed in the 1980s, remains focused on its goal of raising the education level of residents and is the community catalyst for seeking educational opportunities, Edge said.

Two new groups -- The Learning Community and the Higher Education Advocacy Group -- have spun off from the Citizens Committee within the last few months but remain in its scope and report back to the group.

All three groups are privately funded, but Daviess Fiscal Court contributed some money toward a study of higher education.

"It's a wonderful thing that so much is going on in education, but it also has created some confusion about what each organization is doing," said Tracy McQueen Marksberry, executive director of The Learning Community, the newest group. "The great thing is that each one complements the other initiatives."

The Learning Community

The Learning Community's mission is "to engage the greater Owensboro community in learning for life."

The mission sounds simple, and that is intentional, Marksberry said. The difficult part is in getting the group's message out to all segments of the community and bringing major partners -- such as employers -- on board.

"When we talk about learning for life, we're talking about anything that enriches your life, and that can be learning that helps with your job or learning how to sew or working on a degree; they all have tremendous value," Marksberry said.

Seven subcommittees already are in place with more likely to come.

The community outreach subgroup will be taking the lifelong learning message to as many areas as possible, including neighborhood alliances, community centers and churches.

The group is planning to develop a survey that will measure residents' attitudes toward learning and form the baseline for the initiative. A new survey at some point will measure progress.

"We also want to compile data from employers, which may also be a survey," Marksberry said.

"We want to see people place a greater value on learning, and we want employers to encourage this."

The group may look at whether employers provide tuition reimbursement, on-the-job training or education assistance to employees' children.

The Citizens Committee has been touting the link between learning and earning for years, and the message apparently is gaining ground.

The Learning Community office is in the Economic Development Corp. suite of The Commerce Center at Chase Bank downtown. The EDC is providing office space as an in-kind contribution. "It's important that we're here; it really makes a statement," Marksberry said. "We have a tremendous opportunity, with all that's going on in education and the changes in the EDC, to make a huge impact."

Higher Education Advocacy Group

The new Higher Education Advocacy Group was formed in March to explore the recommendations in the Chance Report, which researched the community's higher education participation and opportunities.

That study shows that Daviess County ranks 18th among all counties in the number of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher, with 18.6 percent of the 25-34 age group earning degrees. The county ranks last when compared to counties where there is a four-year public institution.

"We're more narrowly focused than the other two groups," co-chairman David Searles said. "... but our memberships overlap and we work closely together."

The group approved its strategies and objectives last month. High on the list is increasing the number of graduates from local colleges and universities.

The planning document sets out what the group would like the community to look like in about 15 years in terms of education attainment.

For the long term, the group wants to increase the number of associate, bachelor, master, professional and doctoral degree-holders from 22 percent to 32 percent by 2020.

The strategies to get to that level are to boost the number of graduates from local higher ed institutions, improve local access to degree programs and provide resources to help any resident who wants to go to college.

The plan lays out five objectives including increasing Western Kentucky University's number of offerings for juniors and seniors so more students can earn degrees at a close and affordable university.

The ultimate goals are to see growth at all local institutions along with a branch of a public university that offers four-year and graduate degrees.

"As our vision of the future, we would like to see all these goals reached," Searles said. "It's more than a trifle ambitious, but doable. Even if we only get two-thirds of the way, it will be excellent."

The new goals and objectives sum up what the higher education group feels it can do as an advocacy group, co-chairwoman Esther Jansing said.

Jansing is a longtime state education advocate serving on the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Prichard Committee.

"It struck me how similar our work is with what the state is going through addressing reforms in House Bill 1," she said. "I see us as in sync with the five questions the council poses."

Those five questions address whether: Kentuckians are ready for college, public education is accessible, more residents are earning degrees and certificates, residents are getting prepared for life and work and if the economy is improving.

"The only way House Bill 1's objectives can be met is at the local level," she said. "We're focused on the higher education piece."

The committee also wants to ensure that OCTC credits are readily transferable to four-year colleges and that students understand how the process works. Having more degree programs the community needs also is on the list.

"We want the community to be unified in this, and we want residents to be willing to spend time and, possibly in the future, their money, to make it happen," Searles said.

The local group also wants to create an awareness of why education is necessary, Jansing said.

"That's where I see The Learning Community comes in," she said. "They're trying to change culture in Owensboro. If they get their job done well, ours will be easy."